



**BLADES**  
TALADAS OF THE TRILOGY  
**TIGER**  
VOLUME ONE  
CHRIS PIERSON



# Prologue



FROM THE ARCHIVES OF NIGHTLUND, VOLUME XIX  
PENNED BY THE RED ROBE PELANDER

**M**y dreams grow more vivid every night. I wake cold and damp with sweat while darkness still rules the sky and the moons ride high. The moons sing to me while I sleep, for they have seen much in their new time looking down upon Krynn. They know this world better than any man, elf or dragon could. They see all.

There has been talk, particularly in the glory days at the ends of the Third and Fourth Ages, of lands beyond this continent of Ansalon—lands that know not of Solamnic Knights, nor Highlords, nor the War of Souls. Lands of fire and death, of bloodthirsty barbarians and shattered ruins. Lands where man, elf, dwarf, and minotaur have forged empires that no one on Ansalon has seen with his own eyes.

Scholars have long debated the existence of such places, most vigorously when my mentor, Bezok of Austas, proclaimed not only that such lands existed but that, with good enough ships and brave enough men, an expedition could actually *reach* them. I regret that the Second Cataclysm and the subsequent (and thankfully temporary) loss of magic in the world stopped the fulfillment of his ambition—just as the First Cataclysm aborted the ambitions of those explorers who hoped to set

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forth for lands far from poor, doomed Istar. Since Bezok's unfortunate disappearance some seventeen winters ago, talk of these far lands has been silenced.

Let the silence now end. For I now share Bezok's dream. I have seen the far lands, borne to me upon the song of the moons. I have seen the shores on Krynn's far side, where all is different and lore and language are strange. I have walked among its people, invisible, and seen their troubles and trials. And this is no mere phantasm as many—within my Order and without—will be wont to claim. For the land is much changed since Bezok first wrote of it, and changes still.

I speak, and dream, of Taladas.

The tale that follows is of this land, but before we begin, you should know something of the place and its people. For while it is much the same as Ansalon, it is also as different as the red moon from the silver. Or the black.

Consider Krynn—an orb of blue, a sapphire globe, set upon black velvet. See Ansalon, resting upon its southern half. Now take it in your hand and turn, turn, until the lands you know face away. See the markings of green and brown—and burning red—in the north? This is Taladas. Here, just as Istar once ruled over Ansalon, a great empire once held the continent in its grip. Its name was Aurim, a realm of great sorcery ruled by emperor-mages, not all of them kind. But like Istar, Aurim is no more. Its glory ended on the same day—or rather, night, as it was on the world's far side when the First Cataclysm struck. This the folk of Taladas call the Great Destruction, and it did even worse to their lands than the burning mountain did to ours. They have names for many things that seem strange. The moons are Solis, Lunis, Nuvis; the Age of Mortals is known as the Godless Night; and the Summer of Chaos is called the Dread Winter. Even the gods themselves go by different names, their aspects hidden by forms alien to us.

In the Great Destruction, a great hail of fire fell upon

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Aurim, smashing the empire and splitting the earth itself wide open. Rather than sinking beneath the sea, the Old Empire was swallowed by molten rock from below in a great cauldron of flame more than a hundred leagues across. The heat of this fire burned the lands around it to ash and shining glass, and spewed poisonous steam that killed men and dragons alike by the thousands.

Yet some endured. On the far-flung Rainward Isles, refugees of the Destruction built new kingdoms away from the ruins of Aurim. In the southern jungles of Neron and the northern snow-fields of Panak, tribes of savages dwell side by side with unspeakable creatures, the names of which I do not know: tentacled horrors and dead but still moving monsters the likes of which I know only from nightmare. Tinker-gnomes—the scourge that no part of Krynn seems able to escape—ply the Burning Sea in ships of steel and dwell on its shores beneath great columns of black stone.

The tale I must tell may visit these places before it is done, but it does not begin there. It starts in the great realms of Hosk, home to the nations on Taladas' more peaceable western shores. Here, in the south of Hosk, is Thenol: a dark kingdom ruled by priests of fell gods. Here they raise the dead to serve them and to fight their wars. Such a war is ending, even now, in defeat for the Thenolites. Their great temple burns, their mad bishop lies slain, and the conquering armies are marching back north, following grim tidings home.

These armies are of men and minotaurs, fighting side by side for the glory of the Imperial League. The only true empire Taladas has known since the death of Aurim, the Imperial League has covered all the inhabitable parts of Southern Hosk, save for battered, bleeding Thenol and the forbidden woods of Armach, where the elves dwell. Ruled by minotaurs, the League has even spread its influence into the savage lands to the north, across the dangerous Tiderun Strait. But something terrible has now stricken

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this empire's heart, and the coming months may bring civil war.

Look now across the Tiderun, to the plains known as the Tamire—seas of grassland and steppe, where tribes of men and elves ride wild for league upon league, and where barbarians follow herds of goat and antelope with the changing of the seasons. Here live many peoples, but none so strong as the Uigan, a nation of many horse-riding clans under a great prince, a Boyla, who leads them in war against their rival tribes. The man who rules them now is called Krogan, and he is old and wise, but his reign will soon fail. Winds are blowing upon the grasslands and they, too, speak of war.

I can wait no longer. Already, my dreams begin to fade. I must set them down on this paper, lest they vanish from my mind forever. And that would be a terrible thing—for Taladas has few histories of its own and much that has happened has been lost to the ages already.

This tale begins in the League, at night, in a quiet village known as Blood Eye. A ship now stands in her harbor. . . .

# Chapter



## 1

### BLOOD EYE, THE IMPERIAL LEAGUE

The town of Blood Eye lived off of the sea. Spread out around the rim of a broad inlet with a wall of high cliffs behind it that provided shelter from storm and surf, it consisted of little more than a harbor with seemingly endless docks, storehouses, smoke rooms, and taverns. Indeed, nearly half its people didn't even dwell on land, living instead on the boats whose forest of masts bobbed and rocked with the ceaseless waves. The Eye-folk were fishers, hauling in fat nets of tuna, salmon, and spear-tooth off the banks just beyond the coast. Every morning as dawn gathered behind the bluffs, the wharf blossomed with colorful sails as the ships set out. Every afternoon, the marketplaces thrived. There were treasures to be found among the day's catch: blue lobsters and spike-shell crabs, scallops and giant oysters, shark fins and—on lucky days—gigantic, sweet-fleshed dragon turtles.

At night, Blood Eye slept. Not long after sunset, the markets emptied and all the harbor turned dark—even the rowdy ale-houses snuffed their lamps and shut their spigots soon after dusk: early risers caught the most fish, after all. The only sign of life after darkness fell came from the tower above, which gave the town its name.

It was a high spire of dark stone, with sheer sides

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and a crown of spikes atop it, and in the midst of the slender spire glowed a fire of unnatural, crimson flame. A wide wall surrounded the spire, penning in lush gardens of plants unknown to that part of the world. The plants were brought from all over Taladas: the jungles of Neron, the Ghostwood far to the north, and the Black Forest beyond the Burning Sea. Strange night-birds called from among the trees, and now and then a fearsome growl cut through the night. Though they were grateful for Blood Eye Tower—its eldritch fire made a fine lighthouse—the Eye-folk did not go up there. Even the brashest young men refused to enter its grounds. Though few had ever seen him, all knew it to be the home of Ruskal Eight-Fingers. And all knew Ruskal did not like to be disturbed.

The bells atop the town's main temple had just tolled the midnight watch when a shadow appeared at the rail of the *Horn of Silver* and gazed up at the spire high above. A galley that had put into port just yesterday evening, the *Horn* had come down from the capital of Kristophan, half-a-hundred leagues up the coast, carrying slave oarsmen and bolts of sailcloth—both precious goods for the Eye-folk shipowners. It would move on again two days hence, its hold filled with smoked fish and pearls—delicacies and riches for the minotaurs who ruled the League. Unbeknownst to its captain and crew, however, the *Horn* had carried something else on its voyage, and with a glance at the cloud-scattered sky, that something slipped over the side of the ship and arrowed down into the sea, striking the water with neither splash nor sound.

A short while later, Shedara of Thelis climbed, still shadow-silent, up over the edge of the town's boardwalk and pressed herself flat against the nearest cover. It was a statue of a huge, fierce minotaur, a bull-headed giant holding a barbed trident. It could have been an emperor, a hero, or one of the bull-men's gods—Shedara wasn't sure. Nor

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did she much care. One minotaur was as good as another in her eyes. Or as bad.

Shedara had spent half her life in the shadows, it seemed, keeping out of sight of the minotaurs and the humans they ruled—like the people of Blood Eye. Had she ventured out in the open, she would have stuck out like a rose in a dungheap: her almond eyes, delicate features, and sharp-pointed ears were impossible to disguise. While elves were not wholly unwelcome in the League, they did not go unnoticed.

And being noticed was the last thing a moon-thief wanted.

She had boarded the *Horn* a week ago in secret, while it sat at anchor in Kristophan. Since then she'd concealed herself in its holds. It was not the first time she'd gone to such lengths for a job, and she was being paid well enough to make it worthwhile. She didn't know what her task was yet, only that it was to take place here. Her orders were sealed. She would read them only when she arrived at the job. That was how she worked, and her discretion had made her a favorite among her people when they had need of such talents as she possessed.

Carefully, Shedara checked her gear. She wore a simple, dark-brown suit of sharkskin, both form-fitting and waterproof, and her short, copper-hued hair was hidden beneath a cap of the same. Her gloves and boots were oiled leather, and her face was stained dark with nightberry juice. Over her shoulders was slung a bundle of oiled canvas. After satisfying herself that it was still secure, she leaned out from the statue and glanced around.

She stood at the edge of a plaza. From the stink of the place, they sold shellfish there during the day. The cobbles were mostly clean, but here and there glowflies buzzed around heaps of offal. A rat near one pile eyed her for a moment, then returned to its meal. A few street-lamps still glimmered, but of the guardsmen who kept them lit there was no sign. Nor were there any lights in the shops and

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houses that loomed, close packed, around the plaza—the only light was high above, atop the tower.

All clear.

First, she had to find better cover. Her careful eye spotted something at once: an alley about twenty paces away. She would be out in the open for a few heartbeats, but there was no one around to see her, and it was plenty dark even if there were. With a deep breath, she tensed to run . . .

Then stopped, swallowing a curse. She flattened herself against the statue's plinth once more. The clouds had shifted—the moons were out.

It wasn't as bright as it might be. Solis, the silver moon, was only half-full and waning, while Lunis, its crimson sister, was waxing gibbous. A rosy glow washed over Blood Eye, making the cobbles and whitewashed buildings glisten. Shedara crouched lower, glaring at the sky. This sort of thing had been easier a few years ago, during the Godless Night. Then, there had only been one moon in the sky, a pale mockery of these, Krynn's real moons. That lone moon had reigned supreme for more than thirty years following the gods' disappearance, after the Second Destruction. It had been a good time to be a thief, those years. Even when that moon was full, it was pale.

However, the gods had come back to Taladas, and with them came Solis and Lunis—as well as Nuvis, their black cousin whom only astronomers and wizards tracked. That made Shedara's life more complicated.

She couldn't resent the moons entirely, however. No moon-thief could. Their return was as much blessing for her as curse. Moon-thieves were magic-users, and her power came mostly from Lunis, though she drew from all three. She could feel the red moon burning in her now as she glanced up at its staring eye. For the whole of the Godless Night she had been deprived of that power, as had all true mages. Now, though, it was strong as ever. In many ways, that made up for the inconvenience.

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The clouds moved on and the glow dimmed as they devoured first Solis, then Lunis. The wind was blowing hard off the sea, smelling of salt. In the distance, lightning flared—too far off for thunder. The storm would not make landfall for hours. Still, it thickened the gloom, which was welcome. With any luck, there would be no more holes in the clouds for the moons to peer through. Taking another breath, Shedara darted for the alley.

Only the rat, still feasting, saw her run.

There were more vermin in the alley, both rodents and large scuttling beetles with glowing spots on their backs. They scattered before her, and she kicked a pile of garbage to make sure there wasn't a drunk sleeping under it. Alone, she unslung the canvas bundle and opened it on the ground. It held her supplies, kept dry for the swim from the *Horn*. She took them, one by one, and secured them on her person. A pair of flat throwing knives, strapped to each forearm. Two fighting daggers, on her hips. A set of thirty different lockpicks of all shapes and sizes, tucked into a sleeve on her left boot. A bag of spell components, in her right. And last, a leather scroll-tube, which she opened and shook out.

Two sheets of papyrus emerged. She selected the first, which was a map of the town, and quickly found her location. A moment later, she picked out the best route to her target. The tower, of course—she hadn't known till now, but she'd been reasonably certain. She hadn't come here to steal haddock.

It wasn't far to go, so she put the map away again and peered at the second page. It was a message, in Elvish, written in precise, elegant script.

*You will enter the tower of Ruskal Eight-Fingers. His home is said to be well-guarded, and possibly trapped as well. We know little more than that. Within, he keeps a collection of fine artworks from all parts of Taladas. Our agents report that one of these is a portrait of Silvanos, First Speaker of the*

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*old kingdom. If this is true, it does not belong to him, but to our people. Acquire it and return it to us.*

*All methods are at your disposal. Blood shall be forgiven.*

Beneath was a simple seal: the Elvish rune for *th*, ringed with seven-pointed stars, and stamped in green wax. Shedara's eyebrows rose as she studied it. This was the royal seal of Armach. Princess Thalaniya, the Voice of the Stars, had sent her on this mission. She hadn't known that.

So, she thought. The reward's bound to be good.

Carefully, she pulled out one last object from the bundle: a small, stone flask. Unstopping it, she poured its contents over the papyrus. It held wine, which dissolved the fragile pages in an instant. No matter what happened, there would be no evidence. There never was.

Shedara dropped the sodden mass that had been the map and her orders, then raised the flask to her lips. There was wine enough left for one swallow. Smiling, she tossed the bottle, the canvas, and the scroll-case onto the garbage heap and started down the alley.

Tonight was going to be interesting.



Ruskal woke with a start, sitting up in his silk-heaped bed. This was nothing strange. He seldom slept through any night. He was old, and a veteran of both the gladiatorial fights of the Imperial Arena and the wars of the legions. Forty years with a sword in his hand had earned him a fortune to retire on and a personal legend that would endure well beyond his death. It had also earned him many scars, which ached more and more as the years went on. This time it was an old arrow-wound in his thigh that had woken him, burning as if the offending shaft were still lodged there. He groaned, rubbing the aching limb, but the throbbing got no better. He would not sleep again that night.

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His bedchamber was dark. The wind had blown out the candles by his bedside. With another groan, the old man heaved himself to his feet, relit a half-melted taper, and walked to the balcony overlooking the town below. Blood Eye Tower stood at the top of the cliffs on a pinnacle that could only be reached by a long, winding road. A tall wall of black marble ringed the gardens. Several white tylors—small, wingless dragons brought from the snowfields of Panak—prowled the gardens, guarding against intruders. He watched one stalk out of the wooded garden into a clearing, pause briefly by a fountain, then slip away again among the trees. All seemed still, save for a storm flashing over the sea, many miles away.

Ruskal sighed, shaking his head. Emperor Ambeoutin himself had granted him this fief, as a reward for long and loyal service. But after only two years' retirement, the old warrior had grown bored and restless. Blood Eye was too quiet for one bred to battle, particularly one who had neither married nor sired any children. Not for the first time, Ruskal wished he hadn't lived so long. Better to die with a sword in one's hand, he thought ruefully, than forgotten and alone in a bewitched tower. He glanced up at the red flame blazing high above. The fire, like the tower, was a remnant of ancient empires long since vanished from the world. Not even the wisest sages in the League knew why it burned.

Wine, he thought. I must have wine.

He was just about to turn and leave the balcony when something caught his eye. He held his breath, leaning forward to see. For an instant, he'd been sure he'd seen a shadow move, down in the garden. One of the tylors? No, it hadn't looked right—not dragonlike.

It had been mannish.

Old instincts took over. The last vestiges of sleep left him and his ears twitched, straining to pick up sounds. A less battle-honed man might have put the shadow aside as a trick of the eye, but Ruskal knew better. Someone was

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down there, and while his home was well-defended—besides the tylors he had a minotaur bodyguard, Kesh, who stayed on the lower floor at night—he felt the old thrill all the same. His senses told him blood would be spilled that night. Ruskal Eight-Fingers wanted to be the one to spill it.

He'd kept his old sword, which hung above his bed-chamber's vast hearth, oiled and sharp. A hand-and-a-half blade, which most people found funny since he was missing two fingers on his left hand. He didn't see the humor. He pulled it down and hefted it, grunting. It seemed heavier than he remembered, but he could still lift it all right. At sixty-three summers, he wasn't so far past his prime. Not yet. Sweeping his thinning gray hair out of his eyes, he strode to the door and pushed it open.

Ruskal's home was a museum of sorts. Late in life, he'd taken a keen interest in art and had used much of his fortune to purchase objects of beauty from across Taladas. Everywhere one looked, there was something precious—tapestries from Old Styrlia, stone-paintings of the Fianawar dwarves, glass sculptures from the Shining Lands, broken idols from the ruins of Old Aurim. Striding past these, he made his way down the rich-carpeted hall to the grand staircase. The steps led down into the manor's great, central gallery, where paintings and statues and ancient clay urns stood tastefully arranged.

At the foot of the stair was a crystal lamp—an oddity made by the Pillar Gnomes, lit not by flame but by a metal wire, heated until it glowed white. It cast the only pool of light in the room. Ruskal crept toward it, sword held ready behind him. His heart pounded, blood roaring in his ears—the old war-lust, not forgotten. He moved in silence despite his bulk—he had always been muscular, and though the quiet life had turned some of his brawn to fat, he was still an imposing figure. He strained to see past the lamplight into the gloom of the gallery. He'd had rivals in the imperial courts, even a few enemies. But would any of

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them have sent assassins for him now, after so long? Why would they bother?

He was six steps from the bottom of the stairs when a figure stepped suddenly into view. Ruskal gasped, bringing his great, notched blade around to defend himself—then stopped, seeing who stood there.

“Damn it, Kesh!” he swore. “I might have gutted you like a deer!”

Kesh Ak-Chorr was an old friend, a minotaur slave who had served Ruskal faithfully since his days in the imperial legions. He was one of the most fearless fighters Ruskal had ever known, and had once waded into battle alone against thirty Thenoli Death Warriors, emerging from the fight missing a horn and half his ear, but otherwise intact. Anyone who wished harm upon Ruskal would have to climb over Kesh’s corpse to do it. He waved Ruskal back, baring a muzzle full of pointed teeth. In his hand was a huge, iron cudgel that had crushed hundreds of skulls in its day.

“Return to your chambers, sir,” he bade, his voice low and growling. “It is not safe.”

Ruskal hefted his sword. “I know that.”

Kesh scowled, but said nothing more. He knew better.

“Where are they?” Ruskal whispered. “How many?”

“I don’t know,” Kesh replied, turning back to peer into the dark. “I only saw—”

He stopped, stiffening. The mace fell from his hands, which went to his throat. He made a low, gargling sound.

“Kesh?” Ruskal asked, his voice rising.

The minotaur did not reply. He was already dead as he crumpled to the floor, a slender blade lodged in his throat. No blood poured from the wound—some part of Ruskal noted that, found it odd.

“*Khot!*” Ruskal swore in the minotaur tongue. Any moment, he expected another knife to flash out of the dark. He edged back from the lamp’s glare. “Who is there?”

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No answer came. Ruskal felt the sting of fear, but fought it back as he'd always done in battle. His foe was out there, somewhere, and had the advantage. The enemy must be cunning to have stolen past the tylors in the garden—and to fell one like Kesh with a single, unseen throw of a dagger. The injustice of how easily his admirable slave had died gnawed at Ruskal.

He was in deep trouble. His only hope was to draw the enemy out, engage him hand to hand.

“Show yourself, cowards!” he bellowed. “Come taste steel!”

A crash behind him made him jump. Flattening himself against a wooden baluster, he turned to look back up the stairs. From the sound, someone had knocked over one of his glassworks, sending it shattering on the floor. Was there one upstairs? How many intruders were in his home? He turned to glance back at the gallery—

—and gave a startled yell. A dark figure was bolting up the stairs at him, a blade in each hand. Wildly, he swung his sword, but the shadow twisted away and the stroke found only air before slamming into the wall. Splinters flew.

Ruskal had no time for a second swing. His attacker was on him, blades flashing. One pierced his wrist, sliding painfully between the bones and making his sword hand go instantly numb. The blade clattered to the floor as the dark-clothed figure's second knife drove into his thigh—right where the arrow had pierced him, long ago.

Again, he noticed there was no blood. But there *was* pain. With a howl, Ruskal fell.



Shedara was not quite to the top of the cliff when she heard the shout. She froze, her mouth dry, clinging to the sheer stone face like a spider. Magic bound her to the rock, a simple spell that let her climb without rope. She shifted

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her weight, glancing up above her. The noise had come from the tower: a bellow of pain, perhaps a death cry. No mistake about that. She had heard the sound many times, sometimes on the end of her own knife.

What had just happened up there?

She waited a precious minute, hearing nothing else. Whatever was going on, she still had work to do. Princess Thalaniya would get her painting. Shedara had never abandoned a job before, and she wasn't about to start with a royal mission.

She felt the magic pulse in her veins and knew the magic would only last so long. She had to move, so up she went, pressing her hands and feet against the rock. As she made progress, she rehearsed the other spells she had studied: incantations for deadening noise, sensing the presence of enchanted traps, opening doors with a word, and paralyzing whomever she touched—standard moon-thief fare. She probably wouldn't need them all, but they were a comfort nonetheless. During the Godless Night, when magic was stilled, she hadn't had any of them. That had been hard.

The cliff ran out, giving way to the garden's encircling wall. The climbing-spell worked just as well on cut stone as on rough. As she neared the top of the wall, she readied another spell, one that sent forth a beam of silver light that would stun anyone it touched. A handy one for unexpected guards.

The top of the wall sharpened to a razor point. She avoided touching it, carefully climbing over, then dropping down into the garden below. She landed in a crouch and stared around, one hand on a dagger. The garden was watched, according to all she'd heard, though what watched it varied from tale to tale. Whatever it was, Shedara preferred not to meet it. She could hold her own in most fights, but *not* fighting was always the best option.

There was no sound but the creak of branches in the wind. She was in a grove of Neroni snakeboughs, their

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scale-barked limbs slowly writhing and twisting, making a tangle of the shadows. Keeping low, she crept through the copse toward the tower. It was only thirty paces away, its marble walls dim in the starless gloom. Halfway there, the trees ended in a broad, green sward, cut in two by a path of crushed white stone. On the path crouched a shadow.

Being an elf, Shedara could see in the dark. Her elven-sight did not make out the details, but could tell a hot body from cool stone. The thing on the path was still slightly warm, but grew cooler by the moment. Dead, then.

Biting her lip, she moved to the edge of the copse and eyed the dead thing warily. It was a long, serpentine shape armored in milky scales—like a dragon, but not quite. She shrugged. Some of the tales had named Ruskal's guardians as tylors.

One glance confirmed it no longer breathed. A long wound gaped in its underside, from chin to bowels. Something had cut the beast open, as precise as a butcher, yet there was no blood. Not a drop, on wound or ground, when there should have been great pools. Shedara guessed it wasn't the only one of the tower's guardians to be lying dead in the gardens. Whoever had killed the tylor would not have left its mates alive.

What in the Abyss was going on?

There were two doors into the tower: the great entrance at the front, and a smaller door in the rear. Both were shut. Shedara ignored them both, searched for a window, and climbed up to it, the spider-spell still lingering. An iron grate protected the window, but another word of magic turned the iron to rust, which flaked away to nothing when she rapped her dagger on it. Clenching the blade between her teeth, she hoisted herself up over the sill and into the room beyond.

It was a small chamber—some sort of study from what little she could see. Scanning the floor for tripwires and oddly shaped tiles—sure signs of a trap—she stole to the

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door and pushed it open a crack, then caught her breath. Beyond was a huge hall, mounted with a bewildering array of artwork. It had to be worth a dozen fortunes in all. Looking around, she knew the painting she sought had to be somewhere on those walls. She just had to be patient, and careful, and. . . .

She stopped, swallowing. Something warm was moving across the floor.

It took her a moment to make it out, but once it crawled closer she noted its human shape and knew it must be Ruskal. He was trying to rise, his breath coming in wheezing gasps.

Sweet Lunis, Shedara thought. Every bit of common sense told her to leave him be, to wait until he died—from the look of him, it wouldn't take long—then to go about her business, keeping an eye open for whoever had murdered him. Some deeper intuition, however, told her otherwise. Carefully, she eased the door open, slipped through, and made her way across the gallery to where he was flopping around, still fighting to get up.

His eyes widened when he saw her coming, and he tried to crawl away, but his strength failed him. By the time Shedara reached the dying man's side, all he could do was lie still, clutching a horrid gash across his stomach. Looking down at him, she could see entrails bulging through his flesh. There were other wounds too, all over his body. Someone had carved Ruskal One-Eye like a venison haunch. But nowhere on his body was there any blood.

He looked up at her blearily, his eyes rolling white. "Kesh? My . . . friend?" he hissed. "Is that you?"

He thinks I'm someone else, Shedara thought. I should just put a knife in his heart and end his suffering. But she couldn't yet. She needed to know what had happened here.

"Who did this?" she asked. "Who did this to you, Ruskal?"

He shrugged, wincing at the pain. "Never saw . . . his

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face. His servants . . . cut me, but he . . . stayed in the shadows. Only asked. . . .” He stopped, coughing. Foam frothed on his lips.

“Asked for what?” Shedara pressed.

“Hoo—” Ruskal began, then stopped to draw a ragged breath. “H-Hooded One. But he’s . . . not here any more, is he Kesh?” He choked a laugh, which became a groan. “No, I sent him away.”

Shedara’s brow furrowed. The Hooded One? She had no idea what—who?—this poor dying fool was talking about. “Sent him where?”

“Oh, no,” Ruskal breathed, and shook his head. “Won’t tell . . . not even you, my . . . friend. He is safe. From . . . *him*.”

He was almost gone, already growing cold.

“K-Kesh?” he whispered, afraid.

“What is it, my friend?” she asked softly.

“My . . . sword,” he replied. “Will you . . . bring. . . .”

“Where?” she asked.

He pointed behind him. There were stairs back there. At their feet lay a broken lamp, next to the cold corpse of a minotaur. Kesh, she thought as she glanced at the corpse—then her gaze drifted up the steps. A heavy sword lay on one of the steps, as though forgotten. She went to it, picked it up, and cradled it in her arms as she carried it back to Ruskal.

His eyes flickered, and he managed a ghastly smile. He tried to raise a hand, but no longer had the strength, so Shedara bent down, placed the hilt in his hand, and gently closed his fingers.

“Thank. . . .” he breathed, and it was done.

Shedara stood over the body, frowning. True, she herself would have killed this man had he tried to stop her from taking the painting—but someone had killed him in grotesque fashion just before her arrival—then immediately left the premises. Why? And who was the Hooded One?

## BLADES OF THE TIGER

A moment later, she came back to her senses. She was in the home of a murdered man who had made a terrible outcry when he was struck down. How long before guardsmen came to investigate? She had a job to finish, fast.